

*Lonicera involucrata*

Twin-berry Honeysuckle

by Kathy Lloyd, Montana Native Plant Society

Twin-berry honeysuckle, also called bearberry honeysuckle, was collected on July 7, 1806 in Montana. The collection is most often credited to Meriwether Lewis, who left his camp along Beaver Creek at 7:00 a.m. and traveled along the Blackfoot River in Lewis & Clark County approaching the Continental Divide at Lewis & Clark Pass. Lewis and his party were on their way back to White Bear Island and then planned to explore the Marias River drainage, hoping to claim additional land for the United States. It is possible that William Clark made the collection, and we will never know since neither explorer mentions the collection in his journal. Clark was in the Big Hole Valley in present-day Beaverhead County at the time. It is likely, however, that Lewis made the collection since he also collected other specimens that day.

The specimen of twin-berry honeysuckle in the Lewis & Clark Herbarium at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia is lacking flowers or fruits and looks like three little stems. It's amazing that we have that much left after the long journey and less than ideal conditions the plant collections experienced crossing the continent. A label applied by the botanist Frederick Pursh reads, "A Shrub within the Rocky mountains / found in moist grounds near branches of rivulets. Jul. 7th 1806." Not only did this specimen have to make it all the way back to St. Louis, it was part of the group of plant specimens, as were all the Montana collections, that traveled through many hands and were believed lost. They were eventually found in 1896 at the American Philosophical Society and were placed on permanent loan to the Academy of Natural Sciences.

Twin-berry honeysuckle, or *Lonicera involucrata*, is a shrubby member of the honeysuckle family or Caprifoliaceae. The shrubs, between two and six feet tall, have the telltale opposite leaves that are common to most members of the honeysuckle family. The leaves are mostly egg-shaped and are untoothed on the edges with a sharp point on the tip. The flowers are yellow and form pairs in the leaf axils. They are surrounded by two sets of leafy bracts that are green and purple-tinged. The fruits, when mature, are black, round berries and the bracts have turned a purple-red color. The name *involucrata* refers to the prominent bracts or involucre that surround the flowers and later, the fruits.

The moist areas that Meriwether Lewis traveled through along the Blackfoot River drainage on July 7 are a perfect place to find twin-berry honeysuckle. The shrubs grow on moist wooded or open slopes from moderate to high elevations in the mountains, in shrub thickets and along streams and watercourses. Its range extends from Alaska, where it is rare, to California and New Mexico and east to Michigan and Wisconsin, where it is also rare.

The native people that Lewis and Clark encountered on their expedition had medicinal and food uses for twin-berry honeysuckle. The Blackfoot Indians used an infusion of the berries as a cathartic and emetic to cleanse the body and as a remedy for stomach or lung problems. Other tribes used the plant externally for arthritis, open sores, sore muscles,

and broken bones. A stain from the ripe berries was used to paint doll faces and as a hair dye. Some tribes also used the dye to color basket materials. Food uses were limited, with some tribes believing the berries to be poisonous. Other tribes used the berries occasionally or dried them for winter use. Coastal native tribes called twin-berry honeysuckle “crow food,” reasoning that only the black crow spirit was crazy enough to feast on the bitter fruits. Indian tribes from the interior of the county called them “grizzly berries” because they believed grizzly bears loved them. Perhaps this is the origin of the common name “bearberry.” Today the berries are utilized by ruffed grouse and black and grizzly bears.

Many species of *Lonicera* are grown as garden ornamentals and the pleasant fragrance of the flowers makes them popular. A native plant gardener might experiment with twin-berry honeysuckle in a moist and partially shaded location.

Admire twin-berry honeysuckle when you find it on your adventures in Montana, and remember that its moist, streamside habitats need to be protected. And remember all the history attached to one of Montana’s Lewis and Clark plants.